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INDIANS IN ALBERTA

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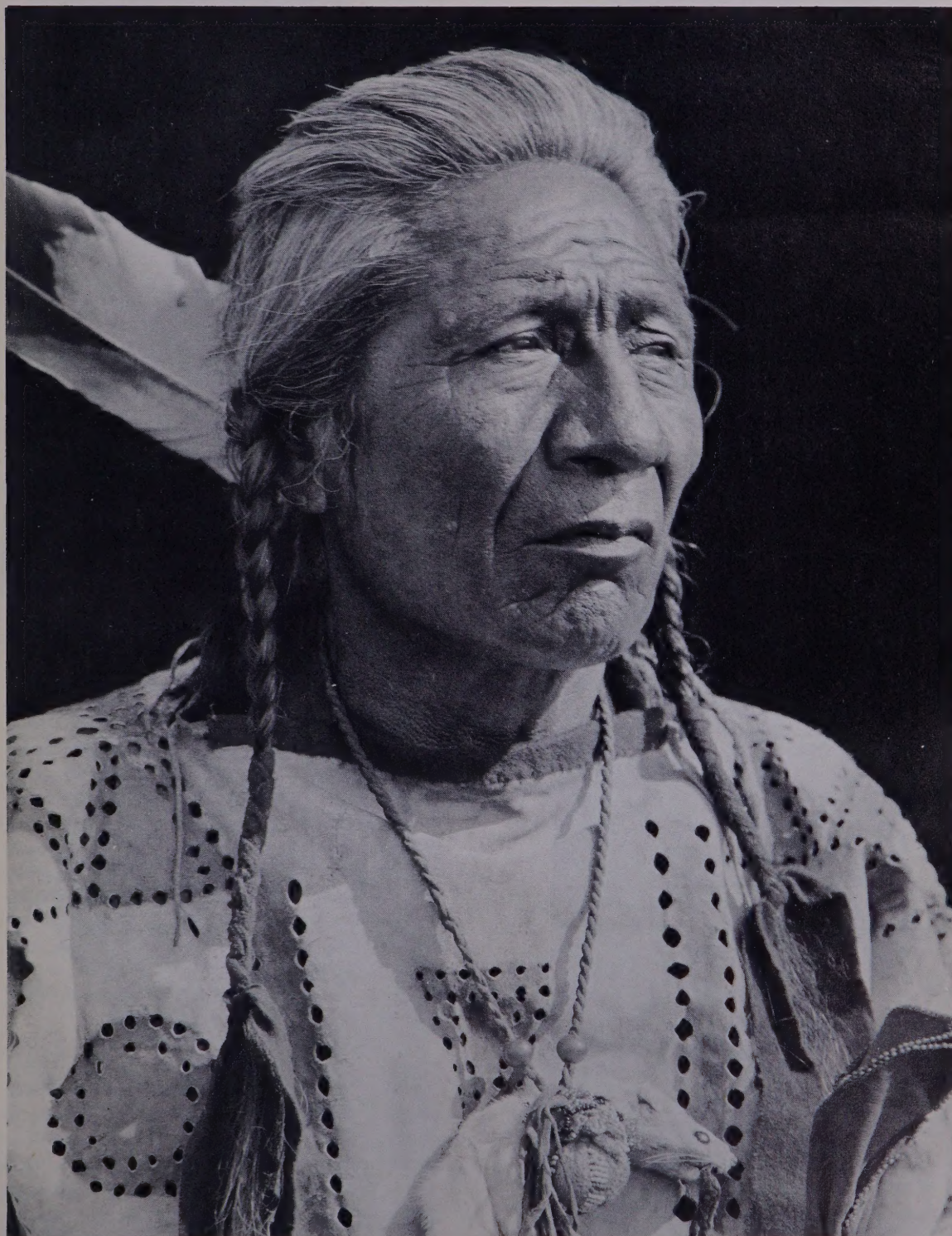


INDIANS IN ALBERTA

TRIBAL LOCATIONS IN THE HISTORIC PERIOD



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Weasel Tail - Piegan Indian - c. 1910 - Pollard Collection, PMAA

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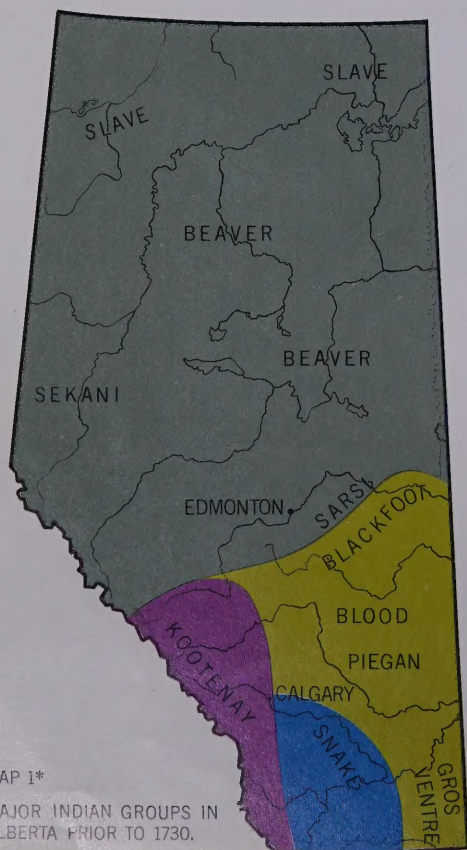
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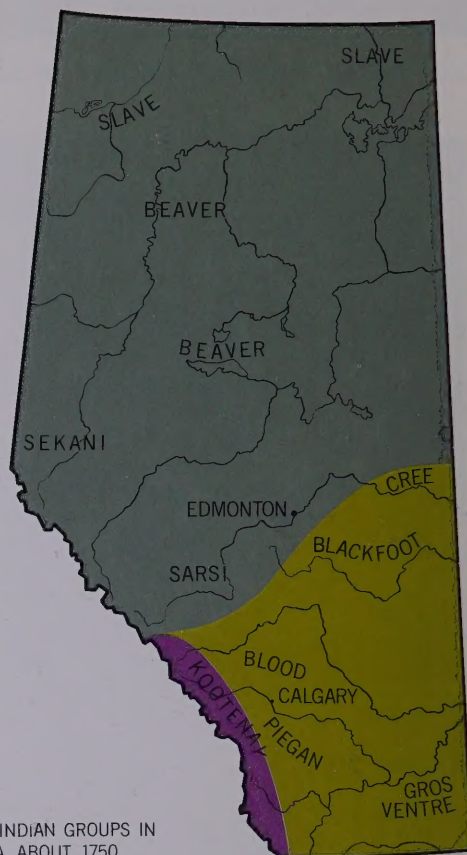
The land which is now Alberta has been inhabited by Indian groups probably for at least 10,000 years and possibly much longer. However, it is difficult to construct a relatively clear picture of tribal locations prior to the 1700's.

When Europeans first came to the Canadian plains most Indian inhabitants were nomadic hunters. These hunters travelled on foot, existed almost exclusively on bison, lived in hide tipis, used the dog and travois, did not use canoes, and spoke languages of the Algonkian, Uto-Aztecan, or Kootenayan language families. They had also developed an elaborate ceremonial and religious life and a complex social system based on voluntary associations known as societies. In the forests to the north, other Indian groups subsisted by trapping and fishing, travelled by canoe and snowshoe, and spoke languages of the Athapaskan linguistic family.

Henry Kelsey, the first European to reach the Saskatchewan River from Hudson Bay and to view the Canadian plains, reported in 1691 that the



MAP 1*
MAJOR INDIAN GROUPS IN
ALBERTA PRIOR TO 1730.



MAP 2*
MAJOR INDIAN GROUPS IN
ALBERTA ABOUT 1750.

Assiniboine and some Cree were on the plains between the Saskatchewan and the Carrot and Red Deer rivers in what is now eastern Saskatchewan. He also reported that there was a warlike group to the west of the Assiniboine who did not use canoes. This group could have been either the Gros Ventre (Atsina) or a Blackfoot-speaking people (the Piegan, Blood, and Blackfoot-proper all spoke the same basic language). Blackfoot, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Cree traditions all suggest that the Blackfoot were the most westerly group; it is therefore probable that the Blackfoot were on the plains northwest of the South Saskatchewan River prior to 1690, and possibly much earlier.

David Thompson, another early explorer, recorded that the Piegan were in the vicinity of the Eagle Hills, near the North Saskatchewan River in Saskatchewan, in 1730. As the Piegan were known as the most westerly tribe of the Blackfoot peoples, it is reasonable to assume that, around 1730, the Blood and Blackfoot-proper were situated to the east of the Piegan in Saskatchewan.

Although a number of Indian groups (including the Blackfoot, Kootenay, Snake, Gros Ventre, and Arapaho) utilized the plains of Alberta at this time in the pursuit of bison, it was an area which did not attract much permanent settlement.

Historical evidence shows that the Piegan were in conflict with a Shoshone group (the Snake) in what is now Alberta in the early decades of the 1700's. The Snake inhabited the land to the south and west of the Piegan, along the Red Deer River. Farther to the west were the Kootenay. (See Map 1.)

Much less is known about the Athapascan-speaking Indians in the northern forests of the province in the early 1700's. The Chipewyan, who had not yet pushed into Alberta, were still situated in the northern regions of Saskatchewan and Manitoba and the southern Northwest Territories. The Slave Indians occupied the extreme north of the province, and the Sekani inhabited west-central Alberta. By this time the Sarsi had broken away from the main group of Beaver and later became oriented to a plains type of life. The predominant



MAP 4*
MAJOR INDIAN GROUPS IN
ALBERTA ABOUT 1870.

Indian group in northern Alberta at this time was the Beaver. (See Map 1.)

The Blackfoot acquired their first horses from the Shoshone in about 1730 and at about the same time obtained rifles and iron from the Cree and Assiniboine. Tribal locations began to shift as



MAP 3*
MAJOR INDIAN GROUPS IN
ALBERTA ABOUT 1800.

*LEGEND LINGUISTIC FAMILIES

- ATHAPASCAN
- ALGONKIAN
- KOOTENAYAN
- UTO-AZTECAN
- SIOUAN

mobility and political power increased. By 1750 the Indians of southern Alberta were experiencing the white man's influence on their way of life.

Armed with guns and iron arrowheads, and aided by a smallpox epidemic among the Snake, the Blackfoot with the aid of the Assiniboine and Cree defeated the Snake in about 1733 and initiated a period of expansion to the west and southwest.

In their movement westward from the Eagle Hills the Blackfoot drove the Snake and Kootenay Indians into the mountains. The Piegan, as the frontier tribe, led in this movement. They took possession of the Bow River and the land south along the foothills. The Blood came to the Red Deer River, and the Blackfoot-proper to the upper Battle River, south of Edmonton. During this time the Sarsi allied themselves with the Blackfoot and were situated on the North Saskatchewan. The Gros Ventre, under pressure from the Cree and Assiniboine, moved south, and the Cree moved farther west along the wooded country of the North Saskatchewan River. (See Map 2.) The introduction of the horse and the gun thus greatly altered the distribution of Indian groups on the plains of Alberta.

Between the years 1750-1770 the Blackfoot instituted another expansionist move, south from the Bow River down to the Missouri and the mouth of the Yellowstone. This was inspired by a desire to obtain more horses from the Flathead, and by a need to find an area with a more plentiful supply of bison.

Until about 1800, Cree-Blackfoot relations were relatively peaceful. But as the Cree advanced westward with the exhaustion of the woodland food and fur supply, they moved out onto the plains and encroached upon Blackfoot territory. The Albertan plains then became a field for intense rivalry and continued warfare which persisted until the reserves were established. Also by 1800, a northern branch of the Assiniboine had moved into the foothills of Alberta where they became known as Stony Indians. (See Map 3.)

The quest for richer fur-producing areas had brought the Chipewyan westward into the Lake Athabasca region by 1800. This in turn forced the

Beaver farther to the west. By 1870 the westwardly moving Cree and Beaver had driven the Sekani into British Columbia, the territory of the Beaver was greatly reduced, and the Cree ranged throughout most of northern Alberta. (See Map 4.)

Other Indian groups came to Alberta in smaller numbers at various times. Iroquois from eastern Canada arrived with the fur traders and became hunters and trappers in the region between Jasper and Edmonton. Small groups of Saulteaux or Ojibway traded up the North Saskatchewan River, and some Assiniboine came to central Alberta.

The recent history of Indian groups in Alberta has been greatly influenced by factors not of Indian origin. The gun, the horse, the fur trade, and later settlement have all contributed to the acceleration of Indian movement and cultural change in the historic period.

Further Reading:

Bryan, Alan. 1967. The first people. In *Alberta - A Natural History*, edited by W. G. Hardy, pp. 277-293. Edmonton: Hurtig.

Written by:

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Cree Indian - Brown Collection, PMAA

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MAR 31 '80

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WATERTON, Eric

AUTHOR

Indians in Alberta: tribal

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locations in the historic period.

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